

## The Modular Schedule at Holland Hall Past, Present, and Future

A grand fad of the 1960's and a slightly more respectable fashion of the 1970's, the flexible modular schedule in 2006 is on the brink of extinction in the United States and throughout the world. As with most educational fads, the modular schedule was tried and then discarded in some schools and in others, never given a chance at all.

At Holland Hall, the modular schedule certainly cannot be termed a fad. Since the relocation of the Upper School to the 81<sup>st</sup> St. campus in 1970, the modular schedule has been a way of life, a defining characteristic of the Upper School. In fact, given the number and scope of changes that have taken place in the school over the past 36 years, it is remarkable that the modular schedule remains as one of the hallmarks of the Holland Hall Upper School.

### **The Past**

For many years prior to 1970 and in many schools even today, the Carnegie unit is the building block of the schedule for students and faculty. Schools created schedules based on a uniform unit of time, usually from 50 to 60 minutes in length. The class "period" became the operative vocabulary word. The six or seven period day with each class meeting at a designated time and for the same length of time every day became the most efficient way to organize the schedule of classes, especially as schools became larger and supervision problems increased.

It was in response to the lack of flexibility of the traditional periodic schedule that the modular schedule was created. The new schedule was based on a much shorter unit of time - the "module". Many schools chose 15 minutes as the length of the module; Holland Hall chose 22 minutes. Although there have been a number of changes in the modular schedule over the years at Holland Hall, the 22-minute "mod" has remained a constant.

Of more importance, however, than the shorter length of time was a shift in philosophy about how learning should take place. The strength of the modular schedule depends less on the term "module" and more on the word that is apt to be omitted from the vocabulary – the word "flexible". The most important original premise of the new schedule was that its primary purpose was to individualize and personalize learning for every student. Decisions about class size, frequency of meetings, length of class periods and how the school day is organized were to be made by each teacher with student learning in mind.

This premise led to the creation of a schedule that, in its ideal form, was composed of four facets – large group instruction, small group instruction, laboratory/discussion groups and time for individualized learning. At every school where the modular schedule was implemented, faculty members were given some degree of choice in designing their courses to make the best use of each of these aspects of the modular schedule.

Large group instruction was to be scheduled for a longer time block of 60-75 minutes, usually only once or twice every week and for group sizes of 40-60 students.

This time was intended to be used for the giving of exams, lecture presentations by faculty members and multi-media presentations. The lecture center in the Upper School was built expressly for this purpose and, until recently, large groups of students, primarily in English and Social Studies, met in the lecture center one or two times every cycle.

Small group instruction was intended for group sizes of 15-30 students and scheduled for a shorter length of time than large groups, usually 40-50 minutes. More traditional kinds of learning activities were envisioned to take place in the small groups including opportunities for students to ask questions and participate to a greater degree in the learning process.

Laboratory/discussion groups were intended for even smaller groups of students in the range of 10-15 per class. Laboratory classes in science scheduled for 60-80 minutes and discussion groups in humanities classes scheduled for 20-30 minutes were to be designed with maximum participation by the students in mind.

The final facet of the modular schedule, time for individualized learning, was intended to give teachers and students the chance to design learning opportunities that were virtually impossible under a traditional schedule. Individual and small group extra help sessions, time for student research in the library, opportunities for work on group projects and time to simply study on one's own were all envisioned as productive uses of independent study time. In reality, most schools found this facet of the modular schedule too unwieldy to implement successfully either because their facilities were not conducive to students having unscheduled time or because faculty members were not prepared to trust their students to be able to supervise themselves.

## **The Present**

The flexible modular schedule as it exists today in the Upper School can best be termed a hybrid – Holland Hall's own adaptation of the schedule to meet our unique circumstances. The schedule has evolved and continues to evolve as the number of course offerings increases and the time demands on both students and faculty become more and more challenging to manage.

The Upper School continues to use a six day cycle for the scheduling of courses. Such an arrangement of classes allows for a great deal of variety, as consecutive Mondays, for example, have different schedules because they take on different days of the cycle. More important, however, than the variety resulting from the six day cycle is the fact that more options are created for the scheduling of each course. Most courses in the Upper School meet for three, four or five days during the cycle and class sessions are either two mods in length (42 minutes) or three mods in length (64 minutes). A few courses meet only twice per cycle and others meet every day. For reasons only a scheduler might understand, having six days with which to work opens up many more options than a five day week would present.

The four facets of the modular schedule envisioned by its creators have effectively been reduced to two in the Upper School. Large group meetings (with the exception of performance ensembles) no longer exist for a variety of reasons. Chief among those reasons are the demands placed on the schedule by large group meetings and teacher preferences about the kinds of educational experiences they want for their students. The small group meeting, usually composed of 10-16 students, serves all the

purposes originally designed for labs and discussion groups and has become the standard for the organization of almost every course.

Independent study time, the fourth facet of the modular schedule, has become the defining feature of the schedule in the Upper School. In fact, when Upper School students are asked about the most positive aspects of attending Holland Hall, they will often answer by mentioning the quality of the teaching faculty first and their unscheduled time second. Students typically have 35%-40% of their time unscheduled and they use that time for a wide variety of activities. Among those activities are independent study, group work, meetings with teachers in small groups or individually for extra help, recreational activities in the gym, or talking with their friends in the commons.

## **The Future**

Faculty and students would agree that Holland Hall is a school where issues are constantly debated, changes and improvements occur regularly and the status quo may not remain in place for very long. Given this dynamic atmosphere, there may be no other aspect of the Upper School about which there is stronger agreement than the modular schedule. Students are quick to praise the modular schedule for creating variety in the academic day, allowing time for homework and meetings with teachers and providing opportunities to socialize with friends. Faculty members appreciate the modular schedule because it requires everyone to be alert and conscious about time and how to use it and, because unscheduled time is available for every student, class time can be used more profitably for teaching and learning. Faculty members value their unscheduled time as well for the opportunities to plan their lessons and the time that is available to meet with students both formally and informally. Graduates consistently praise the school for the opportunity the modular schedule gave them to learn valuable time management skills for college and life beyond college – in short, how to deal with “wasteable time” and learn how not to waste it.

Given the history of the flexible modular schedule at Holland Hall, the faculty’s willingness to adapt that schedule to the changing needs of the school, and the fact that the flexible modular schedule is held in such high regard by students, faculty and graduates, the future in the Upper School most assuredly looks “modular” in some form. The schedule has served the school well for many years and has helped to create a unique environment for teaching and learning. It may be true that the scheduling fad of the past deserves a new name - at Holland Hall’s Upper School, the flexible modular schedule has become its most enduring tradition.

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